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SUBJECT: KREMLIN REACTION TO YELTSIN'S DEATH

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Putin publicly praised Boris Yeltsin as a leader of courage and conviction, instrumental in bringing democracy to Russia. Official media echoed these themes, focusing on the positives of Yeltsin's leadership and making little mention of economic woes and instability of 1990s commonly blamed on Yeltsin. After an initial pause, TV news coverage of Yeltsin's death and legacy was substantial, but not blanket. In accordance with Russian Orthodox practice, Yeltsin will be buried on the third day after death. Putin and most senior Russian officials are expected to attend the funeral. Foreign representation is still largely undecided; German President Kohler is one of the few confirmed European attendees. End Summary.

PUTIN'S TV ADDRESS

¶2. (U) In brief televised remarks to the nation on April 23, Putin called Yeltsin a historic figure not just in Russia, but throughout the world. Putin credited Yeltsin with bringing democracy to Russia and establishing the conditions for a "free, open and peaceful country." He highlighted Yeltsin's role in establishing a new constitution which "gave people the opportunity to freely express their thoughts and to freely choose power in Russia." Putin termed Yeltsin a "brave, warm-hearted, spiritual person." He commended Yeltsin for taking upon himself "the trials and tribulations of Russia, peoples' difficulties and problems." Putin declared April 25 a national day of mourning, with flags to be flown at half mast and entertainment programming suspended on television and radio networks. As part of the day of mourning, Putin postponed his scheduled address to the Federal Assembly (the annual State of the Federation) by one day, to April 26.

MEDIA

¶3. (SBU) Official media followed the respectful themes laid out in Putin's remarks, with press and television coverage of Yeltsin's death and legacy positive. TV repeated images of Yeltsin on the tank in 1991 and his December 31, 1999 transfer of power to Putin. Russian TV largely glossed over the political and economic upheavals of the 1990s that most Russians associate with Yeltsin. Russian television networks did not interrupt their afternoon programming to announce the death, but devoted extensive portions of their normal news broadcasts to Yeltsin. Gazeta.ru noted the delay in coverage, suggesting that news organizations were waiting for a cue from the Kremlin on how they should report the story. Gazeta noted that CNN and the BBC had broken the story, with reactions from various world capitals and extensive coverage of Yeltsin's life. Russian networks did not broadcast their first reports until almost an hour and half after the official announcement.

14. (U) Print media gave substantial coverage, with few papers departing from the general laudatory treatment of Yeltsin's career. Kommersant, under a page one headline "We Suffered a Great Tragedy Today," referred to Yeltsin's decision to attack the Parliament in 1993, the loans-for-shares auctions in 1994-95, and Yeltsin's relationships with various oligarchs as tactical defeats that Yeltsin turned into strategic victories.

15. (SBU) Kommersant also touched on the relationship between Yeltsin and Putin. While most of the quotes from Putin and Yeltsin that Kommersant printed expressed mutual respect and admiration, the paper also ran oblique criticisms between the two. Yeltsin was quoted as saying in 2003 that opposing opinions should always have a place in society and that he had told Putin that. Kommersant also published Putin's swipe at Yeltsin from his address to the nation in 2006 in which he said that "the hopes of millions had been pinned on the changes in the 1990s but neither government nor business lived up to these hopes." Kommersant also ran a commentary by Dmitriy Kamyshev questioning whether the appointment of Putin was Yeltsin's biggest mistake.

ARRANGEMENTS

16. (SBU) Yeltsin will receive a state funeral April 25. He will then be buried at Novodevichiy Cemetery in Moscow. This follows the Russian Orthodox practice of burial on the third day after death. The funeral will be held in Christ the Savior Cathedral. Putin and much of the Russian leadership are expected to attend. Foreign delegations are still putting together their delegations. German President Kohler is coming, but former Chancellor Kohl is not, for health reasons. The UK Embassy informs us that Prince Andrew will

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come; we understand the French have not yet made a decision on their representation. The Japanese Embassy informs us that Japan is not sending a delegation; representation will come from the Embassy. We anticipate that most heads of State from former Soviet republics will attend.

BURNS